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ABSTRACT

A close relationship exists between children's capacity for learning in school (especially learning to read) and the amount and kind of reading aloud done by parents and teachers to children. Children's literature, especially the illustrations and the language contained in fine picture books, has the potential to provide six benefits that constitute major attitudes and skills essential to functioning in the beginning reading process. Such books achieve the following: (1) offer a store of experiences, (2) exemplify standard English, (3) display the possibilities of language, (4) impart an appreciation of one's cultural heritage and that of others, (5) help to develop imaginative and creative thinking powers, and (6) teach about literature. When young children have been read picture books and read these books on their own, they develop a broader vocabulary, experiential background, comprehension, mental imagery, motivation and interest to read, and understanding of literary schema. A good picture book is one in which the relationship between the text and the illustrations is a coherent, unified whole, and in which the pictures provide details that the reader might miss or not fully understand. An artistic, effective readable picture is one in which the viewer slowly discovers more details and experiences a greater depth of response to the story each time he or she examines the pictures. (NKA)

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Developing the Beginning Reading Process with Picture Books

Patricia J. Cianciolo

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Developing the Beginning Reading Process with Picture Books

by

Patricia J. Cianciolo*

Experimental and ethnographic research conducted in the past thirty years, but especially in the 1970's, and 1980's demonstrate that certain attitudes and skills associated with the beginning reading process are acquired by children who have been read picture books and who have "read" these books on their own. These attitudes and skills include vocabulary development, extending experiential background, comprehension, mental imagery, motivation to read, extending reading interests and understanding of literary schema.

CRITERIA FOR LITERARY SELECTIONS: These positive influences of literature in the picture book genre on the beginning reading process are more likely to occur if the picture book satisfies certain basic selection criteria (Cianciolo, 1979 and 1981). Five criteria are discussed very briefly below.

First, the story must be worth reading, whether it is read aloud to the child or "read" by him/her independently by looking at the illustrations and the printed word. This means that the story must be well-crafted, with all of the components of literature thoroughly developed by the blending of text and illustrations: the characters are believable; the plot contains action, excitement, and suspense; the setting is identifiable in terms of time and place, whether it is interpreted as "long ago and far away" or "here-and-now"; the theme, which pertains to the underlying idea or in some instances, "the message," should be of significance to the child; and the style of writing and

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the art work should be childlike (not childish) and should stimulate sensory images. With the right blend of all these literary elements, which are revealed to the reader in the text and illustrations, the book should achieve a unified structure that evokes a balance between anticipation and suspense and is typified by a vitality and spontaneity that is in keeping with childhood.

Second, the content of the story or factual book should reflect the children's experiential background or should be at least within their level of understanding. Stories should do more than bring to mind the reasonably and comfortably familiar. They should help children see the familiar in a new light or they should offer totally new vicarious experiences to them. Thus, the stories should clarify, enhance, enrich and extend the child's background of experiences and store of knowledge. None of these benefits is likely to be realized of course unless the story brings pleasure to the children and they feel it is worth their time and effort to listen to it read aloud or "read" the words and illustrations independently.

Third, the relationship between the text and the illustrations should be coordinated into a coherent, unified whole. It is no small challenge to accomplish this criterion. Two different forms of creative expression, namely text and illustrations are combined to produce one form of creative expression that is unique and complete, in-and-of itself, namely, a picture book. In this kind of combination, the text and illustrations create conditions of dependence and interdependence.

Fourth, an illustration makes the content of the text concrete, but it must be more than a literal translation or mere explanation of the printed word. The combination of the verbal with the visual in a picture book does not mean that the contents and meanings may be "translated" from one medium to another, for no communication in one medium is ever exactly translatable into any

other. By its very nature and purpose an illustration must go well beyond the level of literal translation. In order to make the text more concrete, the picture should provide details that the reader might miss or not fully understand; it might even provide a totally new way of looking at, thinking and feeling about the words. These details should not be overemphasized; instead, they should be well integrated so that they do not interfere with the unity of the whole. They should add interest but remain subordinate to the whole. Readability of the pictures does not mean that the viewer should perceive all the details at once. In fact, an artistic and effective readable picture is one in which the viewer slowly discovers more details in the picture and experiences are more intense depth of response to the story each time he/she examines the pictures (Shulevitz, 1985).

The fifth criterion pertains to the language that is used to tell the story: the language in children's picture books should be fine language, yet unpretentious; it should flow naturally so children will understand it, will find some of it familiar and other aspects of it new and broadening. When the vocabulary in the story is likely to be unfamiliar to children, it should be used so that meaning can be inferred from the context or illustration.

Furthermore, there seldom is justification for a parent, teacher or librarian to choose "easy-to-read" or "beginning-to-read" books for read aloud experiences. There are exceptions, of course, but usually the language in these books is controlled in vocabulary (type of word or number of syllables) and is confined to a single grammatical pattern or a fixed sentence length. Rarely can an author develop any or all of the components of literature so necessary for quality literature when writing under these constraints. Also, most of these books are similar in format--size, shape, placement of text and illustrations. Inside the covers they tend to all look quite alike; they tend to look like the basal primer readers, after which they are modeled in the first place. Clearly, most of the "easy-to-read" or "beginning-to-read" books

cannot offer the many benefits that have been attributed to quality picture books.

Independent of the language spoken at home and the cultural style of the interaction, the crucial point here is that there is a close relationship between children's mental capacity to learn in school (especially to learn to read) and the general talking between parents and children at home, as well as the amount and kind of reading aloud done by parents and teachers to children (White, 1954; Cohen, 1969; Chomsky, 1972; Butler, 1979; Ingham 1981; Crago and Crago, 1983). Also, the amount and the nature of television viewing done by children has some bearing on their language development and their capacity to learn to read (Quinn, 1982) and the development of their mental capacity in general.

Unfortunately, educators and linguists do not emphasize often enough that until children have spoken (and in later years, written) about their real or vicarious experiences, their recognitions and perceptions about aspects of these experiences are less articulate, less explicit, and these experiences are less likely to affect the development of children's vocabulary and mental capacity. We must do more than just read to children or encourage them to view certain kinds of television programs. Children need to engage in a dialogue about their interpretations and responses to aspects of the stories, concept books and poetry selections which are read to them. Or they might retell these stories through narration, storytelling or creative dramatization.

The planned, deliberate, direct intervention of general talking about aspects of a story (child with adult, child with child) is essential to enrich the possibilities, or to compensate for inadequacies in children's development. This intervention can be accomplished by having the children compare their actual, real life experiences to the vicarious experiences they acquired through books or television. One would also follow up on new experiences acquired vicariously through books and television by encouraging

the children to retell and discuss these experiences. As long as the experiences gleaned from the literature are within the realm of the children's interest and can understand them, this kind of intervention is likely to be productive and will facilitate development of children's language and mental capacity. We can add considerably to children's store of experiences and knowledge by sharing with them the experiences of others through picture books or any other kind of literature for that matter. Anyone who observes and listens to children during their retelling, creative dramatizations and discussions of stories will notice that they will often use words and phrases used in those literary selections. They will observe quite clearly that the language of literature becomes the children's own language. If the language of literature helps the children grow in vocabulary and language power, so much the better.

THE VARIED FUNCTIONS OF PICTURE BOOKS IN DEVELOPING THE BEGINNING READING PROCESS

Literature, especially the illustrations and the language contained in fine picture books, has the potential to provide six benefits which constitute major attitudes and skills essential to functioning in the beginning reading process. These six benefits include: Offers a Store of Experiences, Exemplifies Standard English, Learns the Possibilities of Language, Gains an Understanding and Appreciation of One's Cultural Heritage and the Cultural Heritage of Others, Helps to Develop Imaginative and Creative Thinking Powers, and Learns About Literature. Each is discussed below.

OFFERS A STORE OF EXPERIENCES. Learners of all ages have an innate drive to learn about all spheres of life. They want to know the what, when, where, how, and why about what is happening to themselves, to members of their family,

to other people, to things in their own world and in worlds more remote. A variety of topics are of interest to them. Because Piaget chose not to examine children's concepts of and interest in politics or the social and economic world, educational discourse seems to have made the assumption that children just do not have them. The research studies in children's reading interests and the Children's Choice selections over the past ten years demonstrate that children are indeed able to understand these concepts and are interested in reading about them. (See the "Children's Choice" selections each year in the October issue of The Reading Teacher.) It is the responsibility of educators (and parents as well, actually) to provide a variety of well written reading materials, especially trade books rather than textbooks or mass market books, if children are to satisfy their drive and need for intellectual stimulation and for understanding themselves and others as functioning beings, living in a world of people and things.

So long as children are open to experiences (actual or vicarious) and are ready and able to adopt and modify the linguistic interpretation of these experiences, literature can be used to extend and enrich the children's world. Literature can be used to help children learn more about themselves and perceive their reality accurately and in a positive light. We have all heard many times over, that experiential background is a powerful factor influencing language acquisition and is essential for comprehending what is read aloud or what one reads on one's own. Listening to and reading literature will help extend and enrich that experiential background.

Through literature, children may learn that people are both alike and different. The picture book series about Alfie, written and illustrated by Shirley Hughes offers this kind of knowledge to young children. The first in this series, Alfie Gets in First depicts a humorously familiar predicament resulting when Alfie accidently locks himself inside the house. His mother and baby sister, Annie Rose, are outside of their home and Alfie cannot reach the

latch to let them in. This short text and the competently executed line-and-wash illustrations are bound to delight readers three to six years of age. Not only would this story help them to better understand their emotions and feelings, it would also help them to get a glimpse of people who are like, yet different from themselves.

Literature offers a means through which one may learn about all sorts of things that one may not have experienced directly but were experienced by others. This knowledge also helps one feel secure, and to feel a little bit more in command of the world in which one lives. Eric Carle has created a valuable set of informational books for children ages three to six in his "My Very First Book" series. Each page in these books is divided into two equal parts and the reader must flip through the book until the appropriate picture or word is found. In My Very First Book of Homes the reader must match appropriate pictures: the picture of a nest must be matched with a picture of a bird and the picture of bees is matched with a hive. In My Very First Book of Tools the reader must match the picture with the appropriate word: the picture of a screwdriver must be matched with the word "screwdriver" written in manuscript letters; the picture of a hammer is matched with the word for that tool. All of the illustrations in these books are created with attractive and colorful, easily identifiable but stylized collage picture so typical of this talented book artist.

EXEMPLIFY STANDARD ENGLISH. An educational program, especially a reading program, that makes use of quality literature in its various forms, puts learners in situations that permit them to hear, see, and use standard English. It is an easy and sure way to familiarize them with the form of English that is spoken most of the time in academic circles, and in the cosmopolitan social and economic worlds, wherein rest the influence, decision-making power and authority which affect, to a large extent, every facet of our lives.

It should be emphasized here that children are able to conceive and understand those ideas for which they themselves do not have words in their reading, writing, or speaking vocabularies. They do understand them when they hear them spoken by others in conversation or when stories are read aloud to them. They are able to understand and identify with literature in which language is used in a manner that is spontaneous and unpretentious and is without patronizing and condescending controls. This kind of language helps them to create sharp, fresh images of the people, places, actions and feelings. It is the reading of this kind of literature aloud to children that researchers demonstrate will help children to advance to higher levels of comprehension and to grow in language power (Chomsky, 1972; Cohen, 1969; Greeney, 1980).

There are untold numbers of quality picture books in which the English language is used competently and effectively. Most of the picture books which I have discussed throughout this paper were chosen because they evidenced this major characteristic of quality literature. (Some picture books in which a dialect suggestive of people from an ethnic or regional group and different from "standard" English are included in this paper because they were considered useful in promoting other benefits of literature, namely, to learn the possibilities of language and/or to gain an understanding and appreciation of one's cultural heritage and the cultural heritage of others). Because of limitations of space only one title in which standard English is used well is discussed in this section and that is Thaddeus which is written by Alison Cragin Herzig and Jane Lawrence Mali and illustrated by Stephen Gammell. This book offers children a whimsical and ingenious story that describes how Thaddeus Quimby Jones (also known as Tad) celebrated his first seven birthdays with his namesake, an eccentric and inventive great-great uncle Thaddeus. Among the gifts the boy's Uncle Thaddeus gave him were an old baseball bank and

some brand new pennies to be put in it. To get the pennies in the bank one had to put a penny in the pitcher's hand and press a lever. The pitcher threw the penny to a batter, the batter swung and missed, and the penny disappeared into the bank through a slot in the catcher's mitt. One another birthday the boy's doting namesake gave him a book he wrote and illustrated with action-filled water color paintings and black-and-white drawings recording details of how they celebrated the birthday they held in common. Thaddeus is a delightful book within a book, told with fine language and filled with characters and events that will long be remembered. Most of the titles discussed throughout this paper can be used to exemplify standard English to young children.

LEARNS THE POSSIBILITIES OF LANGUAGE. Being read to is a primary means by which young children learn that print can be turned into speech, that there is a message recorded in print, and some language units are more likely to occur than others (Clay, 1979). With this knowledge children realize more precisely that one can make language (spoken or written) act for them as it does for other people they associate with or have observed. This principle of language as the means by which people expresses and realize themselves as a total and unique person, secure in self and in relation to others, is dramatized in Guess Who My Favorite Person Is?. written by Byrd Baylor and illustrated by Robert Andrew Parker. In this gem of a picture book about two friends who play the game ofnaming their favorite things, children are alerted to the fact that the use of specific and significant descriptors when sharing their experiences, thoughts, and feelings will facilitate the use of language as an instrument of communication and will serve as well as a social instrument by which they may share their special preoccupations and interests.

Literature helps children to realize that figurative terms and carefully chosen descriptors help them appreciate the nuances of their environment more fully. For example, the poetry in Cold Stars and Fireflies by Barbar Justser

Esbensen will help the children grasp the notion of time, to recognize intellectually the characteristics of the seasons and realize their meaning and significance. Through the images created by Esbensen's talented combination of poetic language and Susan Bonner's delicate impressionistic water color paintings which capture the aura of each poem, children will store up a wealth of aesthetic images of weather and the seasons. They will be motivated to realize the pure joy experienced by observing everyday things, by seeing the familiar world in exciting new ways.

Literature helps children to recognize that authors use words to comment about human behavior or social issues and these comments may be made in serious tones or through humorous tones. For example, a number of contemporary authors make use of irony and satire and engage in a play with and a play on words to comment about a contemporary social issue or human frailties. Noteworthy for using language in this way is The Quicksand Book by Tomie de Paolo. The most striking quality of this book is its freshness and originality of perspective. To be able to appreciate this quality and to recognize each author's message as well as his/her particular brand of humor, children must recognize how language is used playfully to distort the familiar, to use such techniques as incongruity, ridicule, surprise, pretense, or to cater to children's sense of superiority. Tomie de Paolo used language playfully in The Quicksand Book to introduce humor into the lives of children but also to get them to think about such human faults as smuggness and pseudo intellectualism.

GAIN AN UNDERSTANDING AND APPRECIATION OF ONE'S CULTURAL HERITAGE AND THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF OTHERS. The reading of literature offers children opportunities to learn about and to appreciate aspects of their cultural heritage and the cultural heritage of others. This includes the literary heritage of cultural and ethnic groups and should consist of more than the "Great Books" or the classics. Contemporary writings representing all literary genres should be used to help children to realize this benefit from literature.

One must answer the following questions in order to decide what books should be used to help children learn about and appreicate their cultural (and literary) heritage: Does a sense of heritage require that all readers have experience with the same books? The same authors? Or can it arise from contemporary reinterpretation of persistent human issues? Before attempting to answer these questions consider two award-winning picture books: The Patchwork Quilt written by Valerie Flournoy and illustrated with pencil, graphite and watercolor paintings by Jerry Pinkney and A Chair for My Mother written and illustrated with expressionistic paintings by Vera B. Williams. Both authors addressed the theme of family unity expressed through trust and sharing. In The Patchwork Quilt we are told a here-and-now story about a Black family: a little girl and her mother help the grandmother make a beautiful quilt that tells the story of the family's life by using scraps out of the family's old clothing. In A Chair for My Mother we are told a here-and-now story about a Caucasian family: A little girl, her waitress mother and her grandmother collect coins in a jar until they save enough money to buy a big, comfortable armchair after all their money is lost in a fire. Both authors address the theme of family unity through trust and sharing, human values basic to people living in a democratic society regardless of their racial or ethnic identity. Cultural values children may be more appreciative of and thoughtful about through literature.

Children may learn about and grow to appreciate aspects of human behavior affected by one's cultural background by reading literature that originates and depicts people of diverse cultures from all parts of the world. Through literature children may also acquire an international literary heritage or at least recognize that people from each country of each cultural group has its own body of literature. This kind knowledge and attitude about their own cultural heritage and that of others will help children to be less parochial in their perspective and less egocentric in their view of themselves, of other

people and of their world in general. With this kind of knowledge and attitude they will be helped to be more responsive to and thoughtful about the educational opportunities offered them in them in and away from school.

To realize these benefits children should read contemporary literature that originated from or pertains to countries from all over the world, not just from Anglo-Saxon countries like Great Britain and Western European countries. We have now in English translation, stories that originated in Africa, Russia, Italy, Czecholovokia, Japan, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Germany. There are also any number of literary selections from other English speaking countries like Australia, New Zealand and Ireland which are now available to American children. Staying Home Alone on a Rainy Day, written and illustrated with fairly abstract impressionistic water color paintings by Chihiro Iwasaki, was published in Japanese in Japan in 1968 and then translated into English and published in the United States in 1969. The illustrations in this picture book depicting how a little girl spends her first time alone on a rainy day and her responses to this universal experience are exactly the same in both language versions.

An example of a picture book originating in an English speaking country, namely England and subsequently published in the United States is found in the popular series about Alfie, written and illustrated by Shirley Hughs. Some of the titles included in the perky here-and-now stories involving Alfie, his little sister Annie Rose and their parents include Alfie Gets in First, Alfie's Feet and Alfie Gives a Hand.

Reading literature about diverse cultures might well help children recognize that people of diverse backgrounds have the same basic feelings. A concept such as this can be learned by children, ages six through nine, from Molly's Pilgrim written by Barbara Cohen and illustrated with grease pencil drawings by Michael J. Deraney. Most children could appreciate and identify with this touching story about a Russian immigrant girl's need to feel accepted

by her classmates who laughed at her because she "talked funny" and "dressed funny." They might also learn the meaning and importance of religious freedom and the fact that it takes all kinds of Pilgrims to make a proper Thanksgiving.

Children should be encouraged to read translations and retellings of the original fairy tales by Hans Christian Andersen and folk tales from all ethnic and cultural groups. These classics and folk tales have been available to American children for generations and have long been incorporated in America's cultural heritage. Picture book versions of Andersen's tale "Thumbelina" have been retold in words and illustrations by numerous people. Especially fine is the version of "Thumbelina" based on the translation by R.P. Kergwin and illustrated with detailed and delicate realistic watercolor paintings in clear bright colors by Adrienne Adams and the version of "Thumbelina" based on the translation by Richard And Clara Winston and illustrated with meticulous and rather robust full page richly colored ink and watercolor wash paintings by Lisbeth Zwerger. Versions of "Rumpelstiltskin," one of the Grimms'most popular tales are easily found: Paul O. Zelinsky has retold this engaging age-old tale and illustrated it in full color with magnificent oil paintings containing details of the late medieval setting. In contrast, Donna Diamond has faithfully retold and illustrated this classic tale of "Rumpelstiltskin" with incredibly accomplished pencil drawings in black-and-white.

HELPS TO DEVELOP IMAGINATIVE AND CREATIVE THINKING POWERS. It is theorized that one's response to a literary selection is particular and unique in terms of stage of the development, environment and moment in the life history of the reader (Rosenblatt, 1972). This transactional view of response to literature implies each person's response to an individual literary selection would vary in the degree of absorption and the extent or degree of emotional involvement. This means that children use an author's words and their own background of experiences to create images of the characters, the setting and the action that

make up the story. It means that each reader will respond emotionally to the characters' plights and will vicariously experience in his/her own way that which the author and illustrator depict the characters experiencing.

To evoke imaginative and creative thinking, the author and the illustrator, too, should not tell the reader too much nor too little; yet each element in the story has to have a definite design or focus. This use of an individual's imaginative and creative thinking power when reading results in a chain reaction kind of effect: it will help to prevent children from being locked in their own worlds and could well help them to become more cosmopolitan in the perspective of aspects of the human condition. In their own ways and to different extents, then, children will be helped to broaden their knowledge about people and places and about life in general. A farfetched happening but a very important statement about the importance of fun as an outlet for one's tensions is offered young children in King Bounce the 1st, written and illustrated by Helme Heine. Originally published in Austria under the title Konig Hupf Der 1 and made available to English speaking children in translation, this picture book is an uplifting story about a king whose worries disappeared when he bounced on his bed at the end of a long and pressure-filled day. Shocked to discover that their king bounced, the ministers force him to outlaw bouncing - even by the king. Overburdened with kingly duties, the king grows so weak he is bedridden. When he is near death, he is granted his request "to bounce once more." Seeing how happy the king looks and how much strength he gains when allowed to bounce again, again and again, everyone (including the readers!) is delighted. Soon everyone in the land is bouncing.

LEARN ABOUT LITERATURE. Even in the lower elementary grades children can recognize the difference between "real" and "make-believe" stories. While listening to John Burningham's Avacado Baby, read aloud or reading it on their own, children will suspend disbelief and accept as possible that the baby,

raised on a diet of avocado pears, could grow strong enough to do phenomenal things: break out from the straps of its high chair or wrench off the side of its cot, chase a burglar away, lift a grand piano, push the car when it would not start, and more. However, when having finished reading Avocado Baby children will smugly sit back and acknowledge it for what it is, namely a wonderfully zany tall tale. Whereas, when reading Charlotte Zolotow's But Not Billy they may well recognize and appreciate the realism in it. This charming little picture book, illustrated by Kay Chorao, is a timeless account of the antics of an infant who cried (without tears!) for his dinner, cooed with his eyes closed after he almost finished his milk, slept on his stomach with his legs bent, and lay on his back, wide awake singing to himself. Both books can be used to help children realize that literature is an art form consisting of various genres, some realistic and some fanciful, some in prose and some in poetry.

Exposure to literature, as well as the competently guided study of it, helps children to learn about the structure or grammar of literature. By considering the structure and content of a story together, one will acquire crucial reading strategies, such as self monitoring and predicting both of which have noticeable effects on comprehension. This approach to literature will also help children realize the special rewards that are offered in different kinds of literature, as well as in the different kinds of graphic art used to illustrate literature.

Summary. Certain attitudes and skills associated with the process of learning to read, especially those fostered by children listening to and responding to aspects of the illustrations and text that are combined to create picture books were identified and discussed briefly in this paper. Since the nature and quality of the illustrations and language used in picture books can play such an important role in shaping the attitudes and skills associated with

the beginning reading process, the criteria or characteristics that parents, teachers and librarians should consider when selecting picture books for children are identified and discussed briefly. Six benefits or functions of literature, especially picture books that research and experience have demonstrated to have a positive impact on learning to read were cited. Some specific literary selections that might be read to or by children to realize these benefits or functions were identified and elaborated upon.

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Developing the Beginning Reading Process with Picture Books

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